

# THE UNTOLD STORY OF DR PERVEZ HOODBHOY

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I know, I know the title is a bit cheesy but that's all I can think of at the moment [ I probably would change it ] but it still conveys the essence of this post.

I came across this rare interview of Dr Hoodbhoy, first I thought it would be like the same old stuff that we have read so many times about him but this one was different, as it actually had more questions related to his personal life. So, I am posting here as it is :

Interviewer: When I read your book "Islam and Science", I was quite impressed by your depth of knowledge and your critical mind; and when I heard you were coming to Canada I was looking forward to seeing you and interviewing you. You seem to have an optimistic attitude towards life and a humanistic philosophy. I am curious how you developed such an attitude and philosophy. Can you share with me what kind of family and social environment you grew up in?

Pervez: I was born in an Ismaili family. My maternal grandfather was from a place near Hyderabad, which is now called Sultanabad. He was very dedicated to Agha Khan. He had a lot of land in the village. He gave that land as a donation to Agha Khan and became a waris. My paternal grandfather was also a very religious man; in fact he built the first Jamaat Khana in Karachi with his own money, as a consequence of which Sultan Mohammad Shah named him mukhi. The name Hoodbhoy comes from Hood (brother of Hood). Hood was one of the minor prophets of Koran. So I grew up in this family, which had very deep connection to Ismaili-ism.

My father, however, was not very comfortable with this. He considered the Agha Khani System as exploitative. His rebellious nature influenced all the children so we did not grow up as traditional as our cousins did. At the age of

twelve I began to feel the first elements of rebellion within me. My elder sister was quite uncomfortable with the tradition of praying and fasting. Her discomfort was passed on to me and I rebelled against Ismaili-ism. I remember declaring in my home that Agha Khan was a fraud. That outraged my parents. One day while they were away, I took down all the photographs of Agha Khan from the whole house and smashed them and after smashing them I ran away from home for one day. I was forgiven later on as they were upset about my being away. This was my conversion into proper Islam and I started going to masjid. I got quite involved in Islamic teachings until the age of 14 when, fortunately or unfortunately, I started reading the plays of Bernard Shaw and later on, the works of Bertrand Russell. That had such an impact on me that it bowled me over and by the time I was 15, I was lost, lost to “all good things”.

I went to Karachi Grammar School, a school where nobody talked about the problems of society. Children from very rich families came to that school and talked only about dance parties and having a good time. I went along part of the way with them but I was never very comfortable with that lifestyle. My father was not very rich and he suffered a major financial collapse in 1964 when I was 14 years old. At that point it was quite possible that I might have dropped out of school and gone to a less expensive school. Somehow my father struggled hard to keep me in that school with the help of my brother who had gone to the USA and was sending some money to help the family. Anyhow I was a product of that school and insensitive to society and the world around me. It was really my going to the USA and coming to MIT that transformed me and made me a person very different from what I had been before.

I: I am curious about your emotional relationship with your parents and your siblings. Were you close to them? Did you have an open communication with them? Could you discuss your problems frankly?

Pervez: My father was very rebellious at one level and very conformist at the other. At times he was erratic. Some people described him as eccentric too. He was aware of the exploitative relationship Agha Khan had with the community. He felt it to be wrong that people paid these rather large sums of money to Agha Khan and he used it on investments for his racehorses. He lived a good life in Geneva. I do not think he has gone to Jamaat Khana in the last fifty years of his life. My mother did not have a theological faith but as a conformist she still goes to Jamaat Khana. All that affected me but when I rebelled as a teenager I might have influenced my sisters who are younger than me.

I: What were the circumstances when you went to United States?

Pervez: When I finished school in Pakistan, I applied to different universities in the United States. There was absolutely no chance of my going abroad unless I got a full scholarship from them. I was lucky that MIT offered me a scholarship and admission but it was 50% of my fee, which was \$3200 a semester at that time. I knew I had to earn the rest of the money myself. So from the very first day that I landed in Boston I started looking for a job. The first job I found was in the cafeteria. I used to sweep toilets. I also became a subject for medical experiments. I used to work thirty hours a week. I was still happy because I felt as if I was liberated from the intellectual prison. I loved the courses at MIT. Those were delicious offerings for a freshman and I overloaded myself with courses.

I: How old were you when you came to MIT?

Pervez: I was 17. It was like walking into a beautiful garden and seeing treasures all around. Out of greed I started gathering them, so I ended up carrying twice of the load of courses in the first semester and working nearly 30 hours a week. So that meant that I did not sleep very much. By the end of the first year I was a nervous wreck. My family was in deep financial trouble so I sent some money to support them. But then I felt so wrecked that I did not want to live in the USA. I did not want to be there. I hated it immensely. I was completely happy with my courses but I had developed an antipathy for the society. I did not have a single friend. I hated the mechanized society. I felt like a cog in a big wheel. It seemed totally alienating, impersonal, and mechanical.

I yearned for my life in Pakistan so badly that I broke down and dropped out for a semester and went back home. In Pakistan I recuperated for a semester by teaching in my own school with which I had a very strong emotional link.

Looking back now, it was a happy experience for me. So after a semester I was ready to go back. When I returned to MIT, I got back in the same mode, taking lots of courses and working 30 hours a week. But this time I did not fall into a depression. I was enticed by all those gems so I stuffed them in my pockets again. So at the end of four years, I had two Bachelor degrees, one in Electrical Engineering and the other in Mathematics and a Masters in Physics. I did all that in basically three and a half years. Although I overloaded myself doing that, yet I discovered the value of hard work. During that time I underwent a political transformation. That transformation came about because of the circumstances of those times. That was the time when the anti Vietnam war movement had reached its height. It was also the time in 1971 when West Pakistan Army was carrying out the savage butchery of Bengalis. That was the time when Bangladesh came into existence. I remember the television programs showing the brutality of the army. I have a vivid image of a Pakistani soldier with his head cut off, and his head dangling by the hair, a picture that was printed in New York Times. Those images tormented me a great deal.

Those were the times when I met some people who affected my thinking profoundly and changed the direction of my life. One of them was Iqbal Ahmed. The first time I met him was in 1971 when he was giving a talk about the Viet Nam war. When I heard him speak for the first time, I was spellbound. He brought out so powerfully the agony of the Vietnamese and the complete immorality of the American carpet bombings in Vietnam. The other personality that impressed me was Noam Chomsky. I used to worship him from a distance. Those were some of the people and circumstances that influenced me, and I felt completely alienated from American society, alienated even from the left wing radical Marxists, with whom I agreed ideologically but with whom I could not relate socially. There was a time I joined them in MIT occupations where we smashed into buildings and took them over. Once, the police surrounded us and the provost of MIT stepped in. He threatened me personally, telling me that he would get me deported. I was scared but there was nothing I could do. There was a whole crowd behind me. Suddenly people behind me pushed me and then we heard a police officer firing a shot. There was a panic, everybody ran and I was saved. Alongside my political transformation, I was falling in love with physics. In Pakistan I had a passion for engineering, and I had made radio transmitters and optical communication devices, and I was just crazy about this. I actually saw electronics in my dreams. But when I went to MIT, I suddenly lost that fascination. It was completely replaced by far more abstract themes like nature of time, nature of space and meeting people like Phillip Morrison really inspired me. At that time I thought there was nothing more beautiful than physics. So I studied hard and worked hard and sent money home to support my family.

I: While you were studying and working hard, did you get any chance to relax, socialize and date?

Pervez: No, I had no life outside school and work. I studied or worked 18 hours a day, seven days a week. I did not want it otherwise. I wanted to finish my school, get my degrees and go back to Pakistan to be a part of the revolution. I had left traditional, religious and even social institutions behind. I did not want to do anything with them. Although I was the president of the Pakistan Students' Association, I had strong differences with them on political issues, especially the issue of Bangladesh. It was bitter. We were angry every time we met. I felt we were committing genocide in Bangladesh. So I wanted to go back to Pakistan and be involved in politics.

I: It seems you went through an angry phase.

Pervez: I hated America with a passion. Now that I look back I have difficulty understanding that depth of anger. I felt the entire American society was engaged in trying to obliterate Viet Nam. I remember when Nixon was bombing Hanoi, I was sitting in a car at that time with my sister and listening to the news. When I heard the news of bombing I broke down and started crying. It was very emotionally charged for me. So I felt I could not stay in the USA. I wanted to get out of there.

I: Did you have a clear idea what changes you wanted to bring about in Pakistan's social, and political system?

Pervez: I was a Marxist in my philosophy. I believed that socialism and then communism was the only way for our society to go forward. In 1973 when I had received two BSC and an MSC, I saw an advertisement in the Pakistani embassy bulletin. There was a position available in Islamabad University (it was not called Qaid-e-Azam University at that time). I applied for the position, I was invited, and I went to Washington by train, spent the night in a park and went to the embassy for the interview in the morning. They asked me only one question: "How much salary do

you want”? I said, ‘What ever is reasonable’. They said ‘You are appointed’. I went back to Boston and two months later I received a letter stating that I was appointed as Assistant Professor in the department of Physics in Islamabad and I would be paid Rs. 700 a month. At that time I did not care about the money. I put that letter carelessly in one of my books. So when I sold my books, I lost that letter too. When I went back to Pakistan, I went to Islamabad for the first time in my life. I went to the physics department and appeared in the chairman’s office. The Chairman asked me ‘Who are you?’ ‘I have been appointed as an assistant professor in the physics department”, I replied. “But who appointed you? Where is your appointment letter?” “I lost it,” I answered. “I am sorry, I can’t help you.” So I went to see Kaneez Yousaf, the vice chancellor. She was very supportive. She said, “Welcome to the university. I have heard you are a leftist. We are having problems with Jamaat. Maybe you can help us.” Then she paused for a while and said, “I want you to make this university like MIT”. “What a challenge,” I thought. She sent me back to the chairman stating that she had appointed me. The chairman still would not accept me. He said, “You are an agent of the vice chancellor”. I was in a strange quandary. I only had Rs150 in my pocket. I did not know what to do next. While I was waiting, somebody approached me and said, “You seem to be an interesting person. “ When I shared my dilemma he told me he was also a leftist. He introduced me to his other leftist friends who tried to support me.

I: You seemed to be caught between the vice chancellor and the principal.

Pervez: Yes, I was. Later on I found out that the chairman was legally correct. I did not have the qualifications to be an assistant professor. I did not have a PhD .The chairman finally said he would appoint me as a lecturer. I agreed. I wanted to end the confusion. I did not even know the difference between a lecturer and an assistant professor at that time. I was asked to appear in front of a committee, who asked me a few technical questions and approved my lecturer status. The committee sent a letter to the vice chancellor starting my appointment as a lecturer and offering me Rs800. The vice chancellor sent the letter back stating: Assistant professor pay Rs700. During all this confusion the vice chancellor became convinced that I was a strange man. She wrote a secret letter to the treasurer of the university in which she said, “Hoodbhoy is a leftist, he is on the pay of CIA. He appears dangerous. Do not give him any house allowance so that he will be forced to leave.” Well, after a lot of initial complications, eventually I did become a lecturer and that was the beginning of my 27 years at the university. Now of course I am a professor. In that system everybody rises with time. But for the next two years after I started I got involved with trade unions and went to villages to spread Chairman Mao’s message. Those were two difficult years of my life but I think I learnt a lot.

I: Let us focus on your family life for a while. How and when did you decide to get married?

Pervez: I met her during my travels to the villages. We used to go to a remote village. We had to walk six miles but it was up a mountain, down a mountain, up a mountain, down a mountain. There were no roads. Even for physically fit people it was hard to climb. And then there was an epidemic. We had a doctor in our team who suggested we should inoculate these villagers, otherwise they might fall prey to the epidemic. We could inoculate men but we needed a woman to inoculate women. We discussed all the women we knew socially and I suggested the sister of a friend. When we approached her she agreed. We had several trips together to villages and later on we got married. Those were two tough years. During that time I taught in a school and found out how brutal village teachers were. They were sadistic bastards. They would exercise their muscles on innocent children. And I also learned about how difficult it is to help people to change their thinking. During those two years I was also feeling inadequate academically. I felt I had to get a Ph.D. so I applied to MIT for graduate school. I went back to the USA and did my Ph.D. in three years, after which I returned to Pakistan. By that time Pakistan’s political climate had changed. Within a few months Bhutto was hanged and Zia’s regime started. It was the most terrible period of our history. Many people suffered, especially those who resisted Zia’s regime. I was lucky but many of my friends were not. We used to produce a magazine named Amour-e-Pakistan, and fight against martial law. We used to write slogans on the walls. I had invented a special device, which enabled us to write slogans in two minutes that took others to write in fifteen minutes. We used a detergent bottle, filled it with mobile oil and black coloring and put a shaving brush up front. It did miracles. One day before the American Secretary of State’s visit to Pakistan we covered the walls with slogans against Zia-ul-Haq and America. The army, the police and the security forces were all astonished at the slogans. We did this again and again until they started having night patrols in Pindi and Islamabad. During that time I applied to Washington to do my post doctorate. I left one month before my friends got arrested. One of them was putting the magazines in a shop when the security officer saw him and he was taken to the police station. When Zia-ul-Haq received the news he ordered a massive crack up. He said, ‘we should get rid of this cancer of

politics from Qaid-e-Azam university. My friends were put in jail and tortured brutally. One of them was hung upside down and beaten, his genitals were burnt. He was tortured physically and mentally. He is still a broken man after all these years. One of them revealed my name to the police and they came to search my home, but luckily my brother-in-law took all the materials out before the police came. The police found nothing. They still have a case against me somewhere. After a year in USA and doing my post doc I came back to Pakistan in 1983. I was shocked to see that Islamization of knowledge had taken place in Pakistan. At that time I decided to do my work by writing and speaking rather than going to villages.

I: How has your political struggles affected your relationship with your wife?

Pervez: You have to remember she is Iqbal Ahmed's niece. We both loved her uncle and were shattered when he passed away. We both have the same political values. I think the same goes for our attitude in bringing up children. We want them to be thinking people who find their own way in life. I am quite happy with their attitude and optimistic they will find their right place in life.

I: How old are they?

Pervez: The elder one is 20, the younger one 15. Interestingly enough, both were born on the same day.

I: What was the reaction of your extended family to your political activities?

Pervez: Of course they have always been fearful and concerned. They consider it dangerous but one has to take certain risk in life to achieve something.

I: But now you seem very gentle and kind. You don't sound angry as you were before. What made you change over the years?

Pervez: I changed out of necessity. I think I am a pretty difficult person to live with. My wife will testify to that. In fact she will say, I am not only difficult, I am impossible. Experience tells you that you can be angry but you better not show it. You can be impatient but you have to appear patient. At times I feel frustrated thinking that we have not done much. If you look at what happened to Pakistan in the last thirty years, you might say, it has gone down, down, down. Some grin and say, 'Yes, it could have been different'. Sometimes I believe myself when I say that and sometimes I don't. But then what is the alternative? You cannot give up. You cannot say, 'Things are so bad that nothing can be done'. The fact is that in personal terms I am fine and many other people are fine. If we see the country today as a whole there are more cars and more TV's and more food and more medicine. People live longer. All these things are of course important, but there is also far more frustration than ever before. Civilized behavior has become rare and there is animosity among diverse groups in our society. If we want to make a balance sheet most people would say that we are going down. Maybe one has to agree with it, but what do you do with that? Do you give up? Do you stop struggling? If you can't do that, then you have to appear optimistic.

I: Your book, your articles and speeches make you appear as a Muslim scholar, Muslim scientist. Why do you not leave the religious podium and speak completely on secular terms?

Pervez: Well, that is a very vexing question. I think if you want to have any degree of credibility with people whose destiny you want to change, then you cannot say, "I am not one of you". The reality is I was born a Muslim. I was for a while a very strongly practicing Muslim. All of us were brought up in a Muslim tradition. We cannot completely cut ourselves off from our roots. Let me tell you a story about Iqbal Ahmed. When he was dying, Raza Qazim's wife, who adored him, stood outside the room and read Quran for hours. When I informed Iqbal Ahmed. He invited her in and asked her to sit down. She was reading Quran even when inside. At one point I scribbled a note asking Iqbal Ahmed if I could request her to stop. He shook his finger, asking me not to do that. Later on when she left, I asked him, 'Why did you tolerate this? You are not a Muslim'. "Of course I am," he said. "No, you are not," I insisted. "You don't believe in Allah, the Quran, angels or the Day of Judgment". "Yes, I am," he still insisted. "I was born a Muslim and I will always remain that". Although he never made any supplications to God,

never asked for forgiveness, yet to the very end, he felt he was rooted in the culture he had lived in. I think it is a dilemma we all have. Though we may not believe in it, yet we were born in something and that something stamps us forever. So we are Secular Muslims.

I: Now let us talk about Khaldunia University. At what stage did your focus changed from politics to education?

Pervez: I think circumstances dictate a lot. If you are in a university and you encounter students who have come up through the lower levels of education and you see how warped their thinking is, then you realize how important it is to make sure that students develop the right attitude towards life and learning. Maybe if I were in a village and not in a university, I might have joined Sattar Eedi and got involved in social reforms. It is clear to me that I must try to change people through education. And this has to be done at every level. With my education and background, perhaps I will make a more meaningful contribution at the university level than, let us say, primary school. But you need people there as well. There are all sorts of things needing to be done in all sorts of places. I think higher education is particularly important because it is from there that leaders of society emerge; and if you can influence them, then you can influence many more people. That is why I think Iqbal Ahmed had the right idea with his vision of Khaldoonia University.

I: Do you feel you have found the right focus of your energies, ambitions and dreams?

Pervez: To me it is the most important thing that I can probably do. And I must admit that it is because I feel I owe it Eqbal Ahmed.

I: While you were talking about Iqbal Ahmed, I saw more feelings than when you talked about your dad.

Pervez: It is very hard for me to talk about him. He died in my arms. I have never been so devastated. He was a wonderful man. I can't even talk about it now. (He had tears in his eyes, so we stopped the interview for a few seconds. When he recovered, I continued)

I: I was curious about why are you still residing in Pakistan? You have a choice to live in the USA.

Pervez: No, I don't have a choice anymore.

I: But you had a choice.

Pervez: Yes, I did, but I don't have it any more. I would not come back to the USA and do physics because it would engage all my energies. I can be totally immersed in it and there is so much to do in physics that I need not one but several lifetimes. There are so many exciting things happening in physics. I have just barely scratched the surface. I have a lot of hunger in me but I am too old. You have to be 25 years old to get into those very cutting edge fields.

I: I want to know your impressions about Professor Abdus Salaam. Whenever I heard his story there was a tragic element attached to it. I heard you had met him. What are your impressions about his struggles?

Pervez: I did not just meet him—I got to know him rather well and you are right, he was a tragic figure. His first commitment was to the Ahmedi Movement, and his second was to Pakistan, alongside his commitment to physics. And all these commitments did not go well with each other. It was clear from the beginning that he was a man of exceptional ability. Initially, he was quite a liberal person. I am told he used to have wine and was rather fond of beautiful women. When he achieved a level of excellence, he was greatly respected throughout the Western world. Prime Ministers wanted to meet him even before he received his Nobel Prize in 1974. It was in 1974 that he was transformed from somebody who didn't pay much attention to religion to somebody who became increasingly engaged with it, which at the end made him a fiercely orthodox defender of Ahmedi Movement. It was also in 1974 when Bhutto declared Ahmedis as non-Muslims. I got to know him ten years after that in 1984 and it was not through physics. I was visiting Trieste in 1984 when he wanted to meet me because he had read my article about

Science and Islam. After that meeting we developed a relationship that lasted for ten years. We even wrote an article together that became a preface of a book. He was a tragic figure because he was so involved with Pakistan. He loved Pakistan very much but Pakistan repudiated him because he was Ahmedi. He was I would say a very complex figure. I should also tell you that complexity also comes in part from the fact that he was one of the original people in the Bomb Project. He was part of the famous meeting of 1972 in Multan in which Bhutto gathered all the scientists in the country together and he was the leading person there. These scientists were asked to look into different aspects of the nuclear explosion but then in 1974 he was cut out from that team and project. Although the project did not go very far, yet he was supportive of the idea. Honestly speaking, he was not an impartial person in the sense that he did favor people from Ahmedi families. He wanted them in the positions of power. He also felt that Pakistan had to stand up against India. He had within him a certain amount of prejudice for Hindus. But he was also broadminded in another sense. He, for example went to India several times and they honored him. And over time his feelings about India did change. He felt rejected by Pakistan. The last time I saw him, he was so unhappy he cried. There was a retirement get together in which when a student came to him and told him how proud he was of Salam. Salam, who was in a wheelchair, started weeping and wept uncontrollably after that,. It was tragic to watch him. And when he died, not one official from the Government of Pakistan came to his burial. There was only a small footnote in the newspaper. All this happened in spite of the fact that he was emotionally committed to Pakistan and he had founded the Atomic Energy Commission. Let me share with you another story about Salam that reflects how he was treated in Pakistan. Before he died, I approached Pakistan Television and met with Rana Sheikh, the director, to make a documentary about Salam's life. She agreed. She was quite a liberal person. So we made a team and went to Jhang, where Salam was born and collected a lot of information about his early life. We also collected clips from his TV appearances, interviews with BBC. There was also an interview that I had with him in 1988. After collecting all that when we were planning to edit, I had to leave Islamabad for a week. I gave all the footage to a producer assigned to me by PTV and requested him to wait till I came back. I could sense he was not comfortable with his assignment, so I told him explicitly not to do anything with the material we gathered. When I came back a week later, I was shocked to find that he had finished the documentary .It was horrible. It was a complete deviation from the original plan. It was obviously sabotage. I reported him to Rana Sheikh who hauled him out and blasted him. When I asked him to re-edit the documentary, he said he had erased it. I knew he had done it deliberately. That is the level of prejudice we have to deal with in our society.

I: Let me ask you one last question. People see you as an accomplished scientist, a successful person. Do you feel that in your own heart?

Pervez: I have so many unfulfilled ambitions that I feel frustrated. What I would like to do is to understand a very different area of physics called Super strings. If I had another life, I would spend it on studying that because it is all so beautiful mathematically and so inviting intellectually. As far as other things in my life are concerned, I don't think I have done very much. Small things here and there. There is only one thing that I feel I have accomplished in my life and that was saving the land for Quaid-e-Azam University from being given away to MNAs (Members of National Assembly) and University professors. I fought that battle for two years and in the end it left me immensely exhausted. There was a time people were so angry they were harassing me, throwing rocks, breaking windows and threatening me. Finally there was a strike and the university was closed for the whole semester. We had to go to court. Finally we won the case and the land was saved. That is the only accomplishment that I feel proud of.

I: Thank you very much for your time and sharing your thoughts.